DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 450 294 CG 030 637

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TITLE Student Retention Study: Implications for Counseling Psychologists in Schools.
PUB DATE 2000-08-00
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Psychological Association (108th, Washington, DC, August 4-8, 2000). Also produced by the School Research Group, which includes Deryl Bailey, Melonie Bell, Lorie Blackman, Carolyn Brennan, Bernadine Campbell-Burden, Marc Grimmett, Melissa Tabin, Pamela Paisley, and Trisha Reeves.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College School Cooperation; *Counselor Training; Dropouts; High Risk Students; Higher Education; *School Community Relationship; *School Counselors; School Holding Power; Secondary Education
IDENTIFIERS University of Georgia

ABSTRACT

Efforts to increase collaboration between governments, community agencies, and schools have shaped the educational agenda of the 1990s. The challenge has been how to involve university educators with their public school colleagues. Developing teacher-training programs within schools has been one approach. An initiative within the University of Georgia's School Counseling Program set out to develop a service delivery model that could incorporate the relationships found in diverse public schools. It involved collaboration with school counselors to meet student needs, development of a model school counselor preparation program, and research on the effectiveness of selected counseling practices. One such collaboration involved the University working with school officials in one district concerned about the number of students failing to graduate on time. Accurate graduation and retention rates of students and the reasons why each student dropped out or transferred were studied. Results suggest that the actual rate of student retention to graduation was barely over 40%. Supported by the data, school officials have been instrumental in changing the school environment, policies, and accounting procedures to improve the rate of retention to graduation. (Contains 79 references.) (JDM)

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ED 450 294

Student Retention Study:
Implications for Counseling Psychologists in Schools

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Paper presented at the meeting of the
American Psychological Association
Washington, DC
August 7, 2000

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Student Retention Study: A University -School Collaboration

Efforts at increased collaboration have shaped the educational agenda of the 1990s. Local governments have called for integrated support services from counselors, administrators, teachers, social workers, school psychologist, nurses, and community agencies. Universities, business and industry, government and community leaders have pressed for cooperative ventures to assist school officials in exercising local control to meet state and national standards (APA, 1993; Gardner, 1992; Hayes, Dagley, & Horne, 1996). In particular, collaborations between school personnel and university faculties remain tenuous, despite the enormous effort given to their development.

The Challenge

How can university educators and their public school colleagues work together most effectively to help bring the next generation of citizens to full participation in our democratic society? What is our obligation to helping our youth who are increasingly likely to die a violent death and most likely at the hands of a peer? How can we help those in need of financial and social support to become empowered by welfare? How will we honor the intent of militants, whether parent, neighbor, or soldier, to regain control of their own children, community, or nation without also violating others? How will we respond to the proliferation of special interest groups and retain a national identity? How will we work to create the necessary balance between protection of individual freedom and the exercise of civic responsibility? What shall we do to make schools and universities more welcoming environments for a new generation of students? How shall we educate these students to be effective collaborators in the workplace of the future? How should we prepare educators to work with these students? And how should we conceptualize our research, what questions should we ask, and to what use will we put the answers?

We must find new ways to work with one another. As professionals, we need to change our conception of one another and of how we work together. Developing an effective working relationship will depend on the development of an increased appreciation of the contributions of the other and upon a mutual understanding of the nature of knowledge in scientific practice as practical science (Hoshmand & Polkinghorne, 1992; Kanfer, 1990). How will we teach if we do not also train teachers to be with one another and their students differently? The challenge is to develop self-reflective practitioners (Schon, 1987) who can also carry on research, accept differences, and then take good advantage of these differences for the good of the group within a collaborative framework.

Real World Research

Our response has been to move toward the development of a training program that operates from start to finish inside host schools, thereby enabling a more dynamic response to the emergent needs of the school (see Hayes, Dagley, & Horne, 1996; Paisley & Hayes, in press). Rather than educate in anticipation of practice, our response

is to build upon the growing experience of the graduate student *in vivo* as part of a larger student development team (Edmundson, 1990; Goodlad, 1987, 1990; Hoshmand, 1994; Hoshmand & Polkinghorne, 1992; Howard, 1986; Lieberman, 1992; Sprinthall, 1981; Su, 1990). Eschewing the educator-as-consultant model for an educator-as-collaborator model, we have attempted to heal the wound created by the bifurcation of psychology into theory and practice while also engaging in social action intended to change school practices. Adopting a postmodern approach to science (Gergen, 1990; Hayes, 1994; Hayes & Oppenheim, 1997; Kvale, 1990; Shotter, 1990), we have attempted to take seriously the challenge to create a science of practice (or a practical science).

Such an epistemology of practice rests upon the assumption, among others, that research must be based in the real world of practice if it is to be useful. Such *real world research* arises from the lived experience of the participants, who share in the definition of questions for study, help to formulate alternatives, and are fully engaged in the analysis and interpretation of any findings. Recognizing the importance of solving problems collaboratively with those affected most directly by them (Lieberman, 1992; Newmann, 1993), educators who conduct research in schools will be engaged in collaborative action research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lewin, 1946, 1947; Lincoln & Guba, 1984, Reason & Rowan, 1981; Torbert, 1991a, 1991b).

Taking a collaborative action approach to research, we have expanded Dewey's (1910) original formulation of the problem solving model to account for the dual roles occupied by the researcher and the subject. Using a person-in-systems approach anticipated by Lewin (1946, 1947), we have emphasized solving specific problems while generating general knowledge. We believe that research needs to be based in the reality of the school if it is to have practical utility. A century of empiricist research in education and psychology has demonstrated its general failure to provide workable solutions to real-world problems (Hayes, 1994; Robinson, 1993). Instead, our attempt has been to formulate research problems within the real world of practice--in the present case, within the practice of school counselors.

We have adopted the model of research as collaborative action noted above. As such, we have accepted the assumption that research and action are inextricably intertwined in practice. Knowledge is always gained in action and for action (Torbert, 1981a). Thus *subject* and *researcher* are both *participants*, involved in the mutual definition of research in which problems are identified, alternatives considered, plans developed, programs implemented, and outcomes evaluated *by* rather than *for* the client. The role of the researcher is as expert collaborator in stimulating the process of self-reflection upon professional practice. As part of our training agenda, students are involved directly in the conduct of research around school-identified issues. Our directive in these efforts is clear: "If the problem does not come from the school, if the research is not conducted by the school, and if the results do not serve their efforts to change the school, then we don't do it."

A Program for Change: The School Research Group

In 1990, the faculty of the School Counseling Program at The University of Georgia began to reevaluate its purposes and direction as part of a departmental review of the effectiveness of resource utilization. Responding to national reports calling for school reform, the program faculty set out to develop a new preparation and service delivery model that could incorporate the unique relationships to be found in today's diverse public schools. Specific program objectives included: (1) collaboration with practicing school counselors to enhance the developmental and mental health needs of their students; (2) development, implementation, and evaluation of a model school counselor preparation program for dissemination to other institutions; and, (3) research on the effectiveness of selected counseling and educational practices intended to address problems affecting the lives of school-age children, school counselors, and the institutions in which they work.

Our program involves university faculty, school counselors, and graduate students working as a research team in neighborhood schools. Consistent with the precepts outlined above, we have confined our efforts to a few schools in which we have been able to develop longstanding relationships grounded in a thorough understanding of the individual character of each collaborating school. We have been involved in collaborative projects with area counselors in the same urban public school system by working primarily with one of the two high schools (1200 students), one of four middle schools (400 students) and two of 14 elementary schools (approximately 200 students each). All these schools have approximately equal numbers of Caucasian and African–American students with small percentages of students representing other ethnic or racial minorities.

This ongoing network of individuals and the structure for collaboration have resulted in several interesting projects. These interventions range from trend analysis and policy development related to academic failure, student retention, and sexual harassment in high school settings, to broad-based goal development, bullying, and parent involvement in a local middle school, to a three-county collaboration designing an institute for Japanese educators interested in school counseling. Although the outcomes from these particular examples might be useful to researchers and practitioners faced with similar problems, it is important to note that the focus here has been on the process rather than the specific outcomes of collaboration as a method of problem solving.

Dropping Out of School

Dropping out of school represents a serious social problem that adversely affects both the dropout and the larger society. Students who dropout of school are more likely to engage in subsequent criminal behavior and have lower occupational and economic prospects (Rumberger, 1987) exhibit higher incidences of psychological dysfunction (Kaplan, Damphouse, & Kaplan, 1994). Not surprisingly, rising dropout rates are linked to foregone national income, increased crime rates, reduced levels of political

participation, lower contributions to charity and social participation, lower tax revenues, and increased expenditures for governmental assistance (McNeal, 1995).

In their review of the research literature, Natriello et al. (1988) derived a four-category typology of the kinds of students who are most likely to drop out of school. The most likely candidates for dropping out of high school (1) have serious difficulties in passing their school tests and courses and (2) do not believe that anyone in an adult role in their school personally cares about their welfare. Further, (3) school holds little relevance for their future and (4) outside concerns interfere with their ability to attend to the task demands of succeeding in school (pp. 11-12).

Educational researchers have identified two sets of factors that seem to influence dropping out—both pull and push effects (Rumberger, 1987). Push effects arise from factors endemic to the school that combine to make school an unpleasant environment for the student. Suspending or failing students who perform poorly in school or who are disruptive or excessively absent only contribute further to the student's growing realization of being in a hole from which there is no exit but to leave school. Similarly, tracking and placement in resource rooms or special classes say to students that they are marginal to the central mission of the school. As a result, structural elements of the school itself may contribute to the school being an unwelcoming place where students feel pushed out of the "mainstream" of life in school. Greater dropout tendencies seem to be related to ever having failed, to having recently thought about dropping out, and to having recently failed. The data imply that better interventions may occur through opportunities for personal involvement either in the school or in the community. In particular, social activities deemed extracurricular may enhance self-esteem, self-concept, and sense of community. Quality personal counseling, appropriate administration of school failure, and personal involvement in the community, including extracurricular and workplace activities are the important considerations (Baker, 1991). Further, participation in certain extracurricular activities (athletics and fine arts) significantly reduces a student's likelihood of drooping out (McNeal, 1995).

Pull effects, on the other hand, take into account that the school is but one aspect of the larger social milieu of which the student is a part. Franklin and Streeter (1992), who studied middle class youth, found that they have "a variety of family, social, emotional, and learning disorders that are intertwined with their decisions to leave school. These youth represent the changing society in which we live and they are a product of the failing socialization processes embedded in family transition, increased psychosocial stress and the evident moral decline" (p. 151). Pressures to take a job, community reaction to pregnancy, or parental expectations can be at odds with the educational values of the school and contribute to the decision to leave school. Couple these pressures with a less than satisfactory academic record, a hostile environment, and poor socialization with peers, and you have a recipe for dropping out. Although the list of causal factors for dropping out is quite lengthy, the literature supports the view that the whole variety of factors noted above are interrelated such that "dropping out of school is not best viewed as a single event; rather, it is a process by which students become increasingly disaffected and alienated from school through predisposing

environmental factors and stressors, academic failure, and behavioral problems that enter into a reciprocal relationship with school processes leading to drifting out of school (Srebnik & Elias, 1993, pp. 527-528).

One thing is very clear from any review of the data, dropping out of school and school violence are both dependent upon multiple level factors within a complex biopsychosocial model that includes: (a) individual factors related to genetics, health, personality, intelligence, and developmental level; (b) interpersonal factors that are influenced by social skills, family structure, and peers; (c) cultural factors such as school climate, religious orientation, ethnicity, and race; and (d) the larger social system as expressed in racism, sexism., economic status, and the like (Natriello, 1988; Tolan & Guerra, 1998). What all of these factors are and how each contributes to the overall prospect for graduation on-time with the skills and knowledge to be an effective participant as a citizen in the larger society are questions that await further research.

This conclusion is disappointing. Nonetheless, researchers uniformly recommend that the difficulty of retaining students to graduation from high school can be met with deliberate efforts to promote: (a) strong positive relationships between students and teachers and school staff; (b) widespread involvement in the school and in contributing to its overall functioning; (c) strong peer group relations that foster pro-social behavior; (d) meaningful parental involvement in the student's education; and (e) community-wide consensus on the value of education and a concerted commitment to student retention.

A Promise

In response to the rising prominence of adolescent violence and its associated effects including dropping out, schools, judicial systems, community organizations, social service agencies, and governments at all have levels developed programs that promised to reduce the problem. Not surprising, numerous commissions and conferences were organized to define the scope of the problem and to identify causes for, the extent of, and programs effective at reducing adolescent violence (American Psychological Association Commission on Youth and Violence, 1994; Centers for Disease Control, 1993; Cohen & Wilson-Brewer, 1991; Kazdin, 1991; Mulvey, Arthur, & Rappucci, 1993; National Research Council, 1993.

Most interventions emphasize changing only individual and not social or environmental characteristics by focusing on changing a single promising risk factor. Instead, interventions must be made using a person-within-systems model that accounts for characteristics of the individual, the type of violence, and the level of the system. As Sarason's (1978) work suggests, the intractability of the drop-out problem may be due, in part, to how the problem has been conceptualized. Rather than focus on the isolation of single factors for targeted intervention, what is required is the adoption of an ecological approach that accounts for the larger contextual features and that acknowledges that such problems are both persistent and complex.

Despite, the importance of this literature in describing current practices, one is left with little understanding of what works, why it works, with whom, and under what conditions. In particular, few schools have attempted to keep the kind of data that would permit an accurate estimate of the size of the problem. As a result, it is difficult to mobilize the local support necessary to address the problem in any comprehensive way.

Student Retention Study

School officials face the daunting task of accounting for students and generating reliable data on the academic trajectories of all students. Research on the national school dropout rate, for example, cites statistics as high as 40-50% nationwide (Muha & Cole, 1991) with a national average among 16-24 year-olds of 11.1% (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998). Our own research, however, suggests that even these studies underestimate the problem by using cross-age samples, extending the age at completion to 24 years, and using 10th grade enrollment as the population statistic.

School officials at one of the local schools with which we work in our collaborative were concerned that many of their students were failing to graduate on time and presumably were dropping out of school. They brought this problem to us (counselor educators and graduate students) and a study was proposed to obtain an accurate accounting of the rate of student retention to graduation. Consistent with our approach to conducting research in schools, the problem came from the school and the research was to be conducted through a collaborative effort between the school and the university.

The goals of this study were to create an accurate accounting of the academic trajectories of the 451 eighth-grade students who were scheduled to enter the participating high school in August 1993 as the graduating class of 1997 and to understand why students fail to graduate within four years. Not only did we intend to obtain accurate graduation and retention rates of students, but also learn when and why each student dropped back, transferred, or withdrew. Fundamentally, we wanted to know what makes students leave the high school and what factors contribute to them not graduating on time?

Using a cohort model that tracked individual students from 8th to 12th grade, we were able to identify the academic trajectories of every student scheduled to enroll in one high school with which we work. Results suggest that the actual rate of student retention to graduation on-time is barely over 40%. Nearly 10% dropped back inside the system, 17% transferred permanently to another school, and nearly 24% withdrew or were withdrawn for reasons ranging from lack of attendance, family problems, outside employment, or as a result of disciplinary action for violent or disruptive behavior. In an examination of the academic trajectories of these students, preliminary results indicate that all students who failed to graduate with their class had previously either transferred or withdrawn, suggesting some systemic as well as individual factors are contributing to the low retention rate.

Ongoing analysis and interpretation of these results with school personnel have lead to an accurate description of the academic trajectories of all students and a clearer understanding of why they are not reaching the national goal of graduating within four years. Supported by the data, school officials have been instrumental in creating a district-wide call to action on behalf of all students that has led to improving the rate of retention to graduation as the primary objective of the school. Currently, results are being used by school officials to change the school environment, policies, and accounting procedures. In addition, targeted interventions for at-risk students are being developed (e.g., freshman mentoring program, school attendance monitor, revised data collection procedures, revised curriculum for freshmen repeating courses).

In closing, we'd like to suggest what will be needed to transcend the violence and alienation children and the adults who serve them must face in our schools? As counselor educators and supervisors, we believe that we must recognize that these problems are fundamentally social problems—that is, that they are about the ways by which people relate to one another. As a first step, we can help them to collect accurate data on their practices and their effects on students and help schools to develop better systems for tracking students participation in school activities. Consistent with our epistemology for research, we believe that we must use our own well-developed human relations skills to help create schools as learning communities dedicated to improving educational practice for enhancing the development of all our students. To do so, we might begin by accepting that our first challenge is not to reduce the dropout rate but rather to accept that student retention to full capacity for effective citizenship is both our goal and our moral responsibility.

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